
JOHN DEWEY AND A PEDAGOGY OF PLACE

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DEFINING PLACE

If asked to define the idea of “place” you or I might struggle. Yet people across time and cultures readily share examples of important places or safe places or “foreign” places with one another and offer heartfelt descriptions in literature and art of childhood places, favorite places, strange places. Akinbola Akinwumi, paraphrasing Yi-Fu Tuan, describes it as “the starting point for articulating cultural meaning and awareness: the core of human emotional attachment.”¹ Rhetorical connotations of place also permeate our language – we may have experienced being “put in place” or described ourselves as feeling “out of place.”

As Edward Casey shows in his masterful philosophical history of place, the concept of place was almost entirely subsumed within the dimensional concept of space² over hundreds of years of philosophical thought: by the eighteenth century there was “no place for space.”³ The territorial specificity implied by place returned to scholars’ attention as a result of the work of philosophers such as Casey, critical geographers,⁴ environmental educators⁵ and sociologists, along with urban planners and architects.

A definition of place, then, ought to capture its multiplicitous nature and multidisciplinary connotations while still being responsive to the specific context of its use in education. A useful definition is offered by Lawrence Buell, as cited by Browne in his text on Dewey and ecological writing, *The World In Which We Occur*. Buell contends that “the concept of place ... gestures in at least three directions at once: toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond.”⁶ In other words, place does not only refer to physical landscapes, landmarks, buildings, towns, cities, and ecologies; place is also differentiated from space by the meanings it signifies for people (individual emotional bonds, positive and negative) and societies (social constructions, positive and negative). The differentiation of individual and social roles in shaping place in Buell’s definition is an important addition to Schultz’s⁷ brief summation, while acknowledging the tensions inherent in ideas of place.⁸

What, then, does a “pedagogy of place” look like? The proliferation of educational movements that make an explicit connection between place and pedagogy can be roughly divided into two branches. The most well-developed branch emerged within a rural context, rooted in (and sometimes synonymous with) environmental education. It emphasizes the role of place in education as

something to develop connections between students and their surrounding environment. Field trips, interactions with community members, and strong connections between curriculum and the surrounding world help ground learners in communities and in a relationship with the land. There is also often an implicit or explicit goal of small-town revitalization—of encouraging students to stay in or return to their communities by imparting local knowledge, rather than the dis-located yet portable knowledge of many state and national curriculums. David Sobel, one of this branch’s greatest champions, defines place-based education as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum.”⁹

A second, less prominent branch draws from the work of cultural geographers to develop an urban pedagogy of place. As Steven Nathan Haymes explains in *Race, Culture and the City*, place is connected not only to ecology and community life but also to social struggle and resistance. For him, place is inextricable from the struggles of urban black communities. Dismantling the places inhabited by urban blacks dismantles black civil society and efforts to organize. A key goal for Haymes as a pedagogue is to support “black urban struggle,” so his (and other urban) pedagogies of place foreground the role of power in defining and creating place and adopt a critical framework, preparing the disenfranchised to seek, create, and use place as a tool for resistance. This pedagogy encompasses (mental and physical) decolonization; an analysis of myths/images of urban life and gentrification (which Haymes, following McLaren, calls critical narratology); creating and supporting spaces for black civil society to be enacted; and a politics of representation, including meanings of the black body in place and space.¹⁰

This division into branches should not suggest a strict dichotomy. Writers from the rural tradition, including contributors to Brooke’s volume *Rural Voices*,¹¹ have called for a critical orientation to rural places; and the developmental approach to place-based education articulated by David Sobel is utilized in several urban programs. Meanwhile, David Greenwood’s (formerly Gruenewald) approach, which he names “critical pedagogy of place,” attempts to bring together the connection to ecological and human systems that characterizes rural place-based education and the critique of culture and power that characterizes urban pedagogy of place. He describes this combined process as “decolonization and reinhabitation.”¹²

DEWEY AND PLACE: ENVIRONMENT, EXPERIENCE, DEMOCRACY

What should an educator, particularly a progressive educator, make of this proliferation of approaches to place-based education? The approaches and “branches” I have outlined above have the common characteristics of making place both explicit and central to their work and of building distinct educational movements around place-based education. But an understanding of place and a

sense of how it may be useful in education may be useful to other educators who are not inclined or able to participate in such a movement. I argue that many of the goals of educators—particularly progressive educators—are deeply intertwined with the concept of place and share philosophical roots. In this section I explore the links between the educational philosophy of John Dewey, a foundational figure in progressive education, and the tripartite definition of place I offered above.

Three tenets of Dewey's philosophy of education seem particularly germane to the concerns of place based education: environment (in Dewey's particular use of the term), experience, and democracy. But although place-based education writers often locate Dewey as an ideological ancestor of their work, and many even quote Dewey, somewhat selectively, to support their arguments, the relationship between these central tenets of his educational philosophy and the defining features of place have not been thoroughly explored.

The first "gesture" of place in Buell's definition is that of "environmental materiality," and as discussed above, in the practice of place-based education that materiality often encompasses the ecology and the built and social environments of a given location. Environment is a fundamental organizing principle in Dewey's understanding of education, but his use of the word has some important differences in meaning. Dewey's discussion of environment occurs in the context of his assertion that it is impossible to directly "teach" something to a person; instead, one must alter the conditions of his or her environment so that learning is most likely to occur. He explicitly widens the scope of environment beyond location: the words "environment" and "medium" denote something more than surroundings that encompass an individual. They denote "the specific continuity of the surroundings with his own active tendencies": that is, the things that are noticeable to or important to a person.¹³

Dewey also includes things which are "remote in space and time" from a person in their environment: specifically, he says, "the things with which a man varies are his genuine environment."¹⁴ The social environment – the "expectations, approvals and condemnations of others," also shape the learning and behavior of an individual.¹⁵ Finally, Dewey describes the educative environment, which he argues should be simplified and ordered, "purified" and "more balanced" than the individual or social environments.¹⁶

The environmental materiality of a place is *not* always, as Dewey points out, a part of "the things with which a man varies."¹⁷ If a man or a woman does not vary with aspects of his or her material surroundings—the foods in season, the availability or absence of water, the need for volunteers to serve on city council—he or she is unlikely to be living an ecologically sound life. Place based educators argue that the educator's responsibility is to bring

those aspects of environmental materiality into students' experience. On the other hand, Dewey's call for simplicity and order in an educative environment is understood by some commentators to mean that the classroom is the most effective educational environment. Some place-based educators find a middle ground by "circumscribing the curriculum within a limited [geographic] horizon"—for example, one square mile around the school.¹⁸ The educative environment in this case is larger than the school, but smaller than the whole world.

Meanwhile, Dewey's understanding of environment as potentially miseducative and his call for educative environments to be "wider and more balanced" than individuals' environments, is overlooked in some conceptions of place-based education. This is the problem Greenwood wrestles with. Pedagogies of place should address issues of absence: what is missing from this environment? What has been lost? What cannot be experienced here?

Affect or bond, the third "gesture" of place Buell identifies, is a central part of Dewey's understanding of experience as expressed in both *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*. Indeed, Dewey takes care to emphasize the role of affect or disposition in shaping experience. He speaks of experience as something that "sets up desires and purposes" – whether positive or negative – and which can be a "moving force", the value of which can be "judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into".¹⁹ That movement may be into ideas, as Dewey infers here – but it may also be places. Social geographers such as Fyfe and Bannister who have written about the role of fear in shaping place, provide a telling example of affect as a moving force. Fear influences the locations people do and do not go, and therefore the environments and experiences they are open to.²⁰

Experience also has what Dewey calls an "active side," which "changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had."²¹ Thus, experience has not only an individual but a social constructivist dimension. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey calls this "continuity through renewal": social groups share experiences, which shape social places and conditions.²² Indeed, his description of experience proceeds from the social context of sharing and passing on group knowledge and identity, to the individual context of learning and growth. While we might trouble the progress narrative of Dewey's "continuity through renewal," the iterative process and the inevitable connection between individual and social experience is evident here.

This social constructivist dimension of experience aligns with the remaining gesture of place Buell identifies, "social perception or construction." Along with experience, another tenet of Dewey's philosophy that is connected with social construction is his understanding of democracy. In fact, Dewey describes democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."²³ It unites the individual and social aspects of

education: a learner should learn how to be a good citizen for the good of both. Due to Dewey's pragmatism, this is not a utopian democracy he refers to but one that is created, constructed; it includes the "belief in the right of individual desire and purpose to take part in readapting even the fundamental constitution of society."²⁴ One should not be surprised by now to learn that Dewey grounds democracy in environmental materiality: "Democracy must begin at home, its home is the neighborly community."²⁵

Although Dewey does not directly mention place, we have seen that his educational philosophy is richly intertwined with the dimensions of place and the concerns of place-based education. His conceptions of environment, experience and democracy link and intertwine aspects of Buell's three "gestures." In order for students and educators to develop a rich understanding of place and places, all three "gestures" should be simultaneously explored.

This intertwining of place and Deweyan educational philosophy underscores the appropriateness of a pedagogy of place beyond practices that call themselves place-based education. The use of place as an organizing principle may help avoid some of the identified pitfalls of progressive educational movements. For example, in "Disney, Dewey and the Death of Experience in Education," Jay Roberts describes the impoverishment of experience in experiential education through a process of time-limited, commodified, "out of the box" activities and "formulaic, mechanical reflection." Anchoring experiential education along the three gestures of place is consistent with Roberts' call for a "dynamic, relational reconstruction [of experiential education]... emerg[ing] from localized, empirical considerations."²⁶

THE PLACE OF PLACE IN A MOBILE SOCIETY

If progressive education and a pedagogy of place have so much in common, why are they not already more intimately linked? Part of the reason may be because Dewey's own attention to locality and specificity was eroded by changing discourses and societal conditions over the course of his life. Many of the locally-rooted images and phrases I have mentioned above come from *Democracy and Education*, written in 1916. And in an essay that is lesser-known in the education literature, "Americanism and Localism," Dewey makes an eloquent argument for an orientation to education that "starts at home" and is immersed in local places.

When one is living quite on the other side of the world, the United States tend to merge into a unit. One thinks largely in terms of national integers, of which the United States is one. Like a historian of the old school or a writer of diplomatic notes, one conceives of what the United States is doing about this or that. It is taken, as schoolmen say, as an entity. Then one happens to receive a newspaper from one of the smaller towns, from any town, that is,

smaller than New York—and sometimes Chicago. Then one gets a momentary shock. One is brought back to earth. And the earth is just what it used to be. It is a loose collection of houses, of streets, of neighborhoods, villages, farms, towns. Each of these has an intense consciousness of what is going on within itself in the way of fires, burglaries, murders, family jars, weddings, and banquets to esteemed fellow citizens, and a languid drooping interest in the rest of the spacious land.²⁷

However as Ben Williams notes in “The Genius of Place,” Dewey and other progressive educators were writing and educating at a time of urban migration and the shift to a manufacturing economy, when conceptions of “community” were being reconceptualized around “groups organized around an occupation”²⁸ rather than people from a particular town or neighborhood. The “new” problem they were wrestling with was that of universality: how could education be of service to newcomers and to people who moved often, how could it respond to the diverse experiences of a mobile society, and how could it be consistent across a wide geographic area?

Dewey was clearly beginning to wrestle with this question as he wrote “Americanism and Localism.” Reflecting on the topic of newspapers published by railway companies, he writes, “What makes these periodicals somewhat thin as literature is that they have to eliminate the local. They subsist for those who are going from one place and haven’t as yet arrived at another.”²⁹ And by the time Dewey wrote *Experience and Education*, in 1938, images of place and the local were sharply reduced in his writing.

Dewey, then, is struggling with a problem that is seldom articulated in place-based education but which is one of its greatest challenges—how to frame place-based education for inhabitants of a mobile and global society. Both urban and rural place-based pedagogies tend to tacitly assume that the members of the community are static and have roots in that community—or if not static, they are at risk of leaving the community rather than arriving.³⁰ But what about the immigrant or migrant student moving into a big city or small town, carrying with them stories and lessons from other places? Or how about the college classroom, with half—or perhaps all—its members who are “not from around here”?

This, to me, is the second lesson an analysis of Dewey has for a pedagogy of place. As well as the important task of helping students how to be in the place they are, place-based education must include an element of meta-analysis: learning how to learn how to be in a place, without the support of a high school or college’s institutional relationships and curriculum. Such learning might include concrete strategies for exploring new places (reading a newspaper, visiting a farmers market, getting a library card, joining an organization, talking to an elder, mapping a city, town or region). It might also include pedagogical structures that foster an understanding of how to learn

about place (having more advanced students teach or mentor new students, for example, so they can explore through teaching what is needed for learning).

I do not wish to diminish the importance of the deep learning that can come from place-based education, value of learning about a specific place, even (perhaps especially) a place one plans to be only temporarily. But in a mobile and globalized world, we would do well to share the skills and strategies of learning about place with students: to make place based-learning portable.

NOTES

¹ Akinbola E. Akinwumi, “(Un)Making place, displacing community: the ‘transformation’ of identity in a Russia–Poland borderland,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 6, no. 6 (2005): 951.

² I should note that not all writers or all disciplines use the terms space and place as I, and Casey, do here. Some use the terms interchangeably; others use them with near-opposite meanings. I have found this framework most useful for speaking to laypeople about place, and most compatible with critical approaches and orientations to place.

³ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 199.

⁴ See for example Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); also E. W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989).

⁵ See David Sobel, *Place-based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities* (The Orion Society, 2004); also Paul Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

⁶ 4. Neil W. Browne, *The World in Which We Occur: John Dewey, Pragmatist Ecology, and American Ecological Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 17.

⁷ In David C. Hutchinson, *A Natural History of Place in Education* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2004), 12.

⁸ Buell’s definition does not lay out a specific home for electronic ‘places’. In general, I believe with David Healy (“Cyberspace and place: The Internet as middle landscape on the electronic frontier.” in *Internet Culture*, ed. David

Porter, (New York: Routledge, 1997), that the Internet has more in common with space - a wild frontier, a boundless possibility, a dimension - than with place. The criterion of physical materiality as a defining characteristic of place is unassailable for me--without physicality, it is not "place." However, electronic networking, discussion, communication and organizing has important implications for the way we connect to and conceptualize place(s) individually and collectively, something which has yet to be adequately explored in the educational literature on place and place-based education.

⁹ David Sobel, *Place-based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities* (Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society, 2004), 6-7.

¹⁰ Stephen Nathan Haymes, *Race, Culture, and the City: A Pedagogy for Black Urban Struggle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

¹¹ Robert Brooke, *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

¹² David A. Gruenewald, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 4.

¹³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (London: Echo Library, 1916/2007), 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ Ben Williams, "The Genius of Place," In *Toward Place and Community*, ed. Vito Perrone (Cambridge, MA: Annenberg Rural Challenge, 1998).

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1938/1997), 38.

²⁰ J. Bannister and N. Fyfe, "Fear and the City," *Urban Studies* 38, nos. 5-6 (2001): 807-813.

²¹ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 31.

²² Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2.

²³ Ibid., 71.

²⁴ Ibid., 443.

²⁵ John Dewey, *The Public & Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 213.

²⁶ Jay Roberts, “Disney Dewey and the Death of Experience in Education,” *Journal of Education and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2005): 3-4.

²⁷ John Dewey, “Americanism and Localism,” in *Characters and Events: Popular Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 537.

²⁸ Williams, “The Genius of Place,” 72.

²⁹ Dewey, “Americanism and Localism,” 538.

³⁰ Theobald, *Teaching the Commons*.
